DigiBrigade:

It's a Winner

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Dr. Steven Shepard

WILLISTON (API) Jim Willis almost laughed out loud as he walked down the main street of the town, looking in the windows of the shops that lined the tree-shaded avenue. Shopkeepers were cutting hair, selling groceries, arranging flowers, and meeting with real estate clients. The library was doing a brisk business, and kids were coming and going between the library and the school, engaged in projects going on there. The older kids were ducking in and out of the local businesses as well, but not because they were buying: they were selling, although the price of their service was zero.

These kids were members of DigiBrigade, a Vermont-based initiative formed in 2011 with a noble, if not aggressive, charter: To bring digital literacy to the far-flung corners of the state, those areas that arguably need it most.

Initially, the program met with some degree of criticism. "There were quite a few people who understandably didn't see the need for such a program," said Joanna Cummings, one of DigiBrigade's coordinators. "Those of us who have access to broadband, high-speed wireless and the magic of the Internet understand without question what those tools make possible. But for people who have never had these tools, who have never seen what a high-speed connection can do for them, it's sometimes a tough sell."

DigiBrigade grew out of a fundamental requirement in the small state of Vermont: To protect the rural, natural beauty of the state, while at the same time creating long-term, sustainable jobs for the state's residents. "Our goal was quite simple," says Mark Snelling, president of the Snelling Center for Government. "Our initial effort was through our eVermont Initiative, which was designed to help rural Vermont towns take full advantage of the Internet to improve economic development, school innovation, job creation, downtown marketing, community engagement, and e-commerce. But we went way beyond the original charter of eVermont, and it's proven to be a rousing success."

Communications, Collaboration and Commerce are the three elements that ultimately led to the creation of DigiBrigade. Vermont may be a very small state (Vermont would fit inside the borders of California 17 times), but its mountainous topography makes it difficult to deploy universal broadband anf effective wireless technologies. The deep valleys, the distances between towns and the small populations of many of those towns proved to be significant challenges to the state's efforts to wire itself. But through a combination of state and federal funding, the skills and efforts of a variety of people, and the willingness of the Vermont community to take part in what would become a grand experiment, the foundation for what would become DigiBrigade was laid.

Turning Point

The turning point came when eVermont, an effort driven by the Snelling Center for Government and seven partners, set out to create a "test bed" of sorts to measure the impact of broadband on rural communities. 24 towns agreed to be part of the study.

"The goal of eVermont was straight-forward," says Cummings. "Our goal was to focus on the grassroots needs of each community that agreed to take part in the study, and then to provide technical support and equipment for two years, with the hope that the power of broadband and Internet access would be realized in each town. We formed alliances with each one, but we soon discovered that we had a gap – and this

time, it wasn't one that could be fixed with technology."

The gap that Cummings referred to was the gap between the capability and promise of the available technology, and the understanding and awareness on the part of each community required to take advantage of it. "We had the technology in place; we had most of the funding we needed to build out the infrastructure; and we had the approval of the towns to go forward and strong interest in what we were doing," she noted. "What we didn't have was the ability to educate a fairly large number of people in a short period of time. The technology was the easy part. You wouldn't think so, but getting the infrastructure installed proved to be far easier than getting people up-to-speed on how to use it. The design and installation work was largely done through paid contractors who understood the relationship between budgets and completion dates. What we underestimated was the number of people that would be required to get out there and train the people in these communities, many of whom had never used a cell phone, much less surfed the Web. It was a real show-stopper."

DigiBrigade

The idea for Vermont's DigiBrigade came from work done elsewhere by Steven Shepard, an author and industry analyst who consults with clients all over the world and who is affiliated with the eVermont program. "I do quite a bit of work in the developing world,"

says Shepard, "helping to establish basic communications infrastructure in places that have never had it, and then finding local educational resources to teach the community how to use it once it's installed and working.

"I often run into Peace Corps volunteers in these countries, and one day it hit me – we needed to emulate the Peace Corps model in Vermont, building a cadre of digital literacy volunteers who could go from town-to-town, teaching people in each community how to use computers and access online resources - in essence, to create an understanding of the value – and power – of being connected. And boy, did it work."

Back to Reality

The story in the "article" you have just read isn't real – yet. But it could be, and in fact IS real in parts of Africa and Latin America. Groups of children, already digitally literate because of their schools' connections to the Internet, are being trained to educate the adults in their communities about the power of digital literacy.
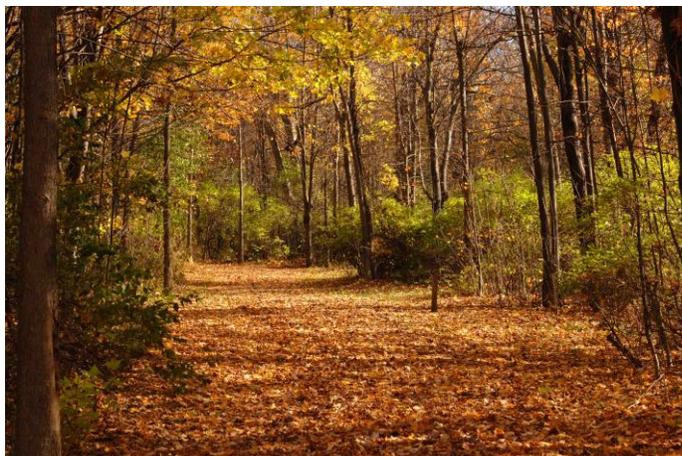
Vermont has a challenge. It is a beautiful state with a thriving tourism industry. People come from all over the world to ski on our trails, hike the Green Mountains, consume our maple syrup, fish, boat and swim on our lakes and rivers, and enjoy the pristine and bucolic imagery of our dairy farms, exquisitely ramshackle barns and mouth-watering fruit and vegetable stands. What they generally do *not* do is come to

Vermont in search of long-term work. On the one hand, that's fine: The last thing we want is for this state to become a congested microcosm of Boston, or Los Angeles, or Dallas. But we DO want Vermont to be a place that has the ability to preserve its agricultural heritage; to offer long-term employment to its residents; to support the short-term needs of the tourists who come to Vermont to enjoy its splendors, including high-speed connectivity; and most important of all, to provide a long-term future for our children who are growing up here and want to *stay* here. That, of course, is predicated on the availability of work that will sustain them, and work availability is predicated on a variety of things, not the least of which is access to a statewide communications infrastructure that will provide the connectivity required for those jobs to exist in every corner of Vermont. That required infrastructure does not need to be overt or intrusive, but it does need to be universally available, affordable, and universally appreciated. And that's where DigiBrigade comes into play.

The idea behind DigiBrigade is simple: Harness the skills and commitment of a single sector of the population – students – to teach digital literacy to the masses. Through partnerships with local high schools, colleges and universities, we fund, through state, federal or local business grants, and in cooperation with libraries and local businesses, a program under which we "train the trainers" –teach students how to be the teachers – so that they can conduct educational sessions about the Internet and its impact in the towns where they live and go to school, and to become readily available technical resources to their towns.

The advantages are profound. Students get real-world work experience, teaching something that for most of them is as natural as the air they breathe. In cooperation with the schools, this effort can qualify as a work-study program, so that participants receive scholastic credit for their efforts. Through an in-place feedback mechanism, we collect and analyze data about knowledge, skill and technology deficits that are identified by the DigiBrigade team members, so that the program undergoes a constant process of tweaking and adjustment to ensure that it does what it is chartered to do. And because the "teachers" are local, there is minimal cost involved in the process of putting them together with "students."

The advantages continue. Each town would have access to one or more local resources that they could call upon to help bridge the digital knowledge gap. As awareness of the power of being connected grows, demand for connectivity will grow in concert with that awareness, and services will improve across the board. And as the services improve, the ability to create high-tech jobs will also accelerate. Consider this: Gaborone, the capital of the Sub-Saharan country of Botswana, went from being an unknown backwater to being the call center capital of the southern hemisphere, simply because they aggressively pursued digital connectivity. Botswana still looks like Botswana, a sleepy, colonial African city – you'd never guess how much high-tech industry lives there - but it has a thriving digital industry that employs thousands of

people and provides the basis for infrastructure and services improvements across the entire country. Through digital connectivity and awareness, Vermont's towns could host similarly advanced industries that would be invisible in terms of their impact on the state's stunning landscape, but would provide diverse, long-term employment and skills creation. And because the Internet represents the death knell for distance, customers for these industries could be anywhere in the world. Consider this: Jet Blue Airlines has one of the largest call centers on Earth to handle its reservations operations. What's interesting, however, is that Jet Blue doesn't HAVE a call center. All its operators are in their own homes, answering calls as if they were in a centralized call center location. Imagine how valuable such an operation could be here in Vermont.

What it Would Take

For the DigiBrigade concept to work in Vermont, we would need the following:

- State government-level recognition of the program to ensure that it has the appropriate level of *gravitas* and veracity needed to succeed among the communities of Vermont.
- An organization such as the Snelling Center to "ride point" and serve as the communications and operations nexus for DigiBrigade through an entity such as eVermont.
- Some form of low-level funding to offset the expenses that would inevitably be incurred in the operation of the program, such as transportation, modest supplies, and in some cases, a modicum of compensation for the "teachers," where appropriate. This could presumably be funded through state or federal grants, or via grants from local businesses.
- A pre-established Web site framework for Vermont communities that could be used by ALL towns, to ensure commonality of imagery, messaging and "feel." To a certain extent, each Web site should offer the same information: a statement about the town, a list of town officers, important phone numbers and e-mail addresses, a schedule of town events, a local business directory, a special "what to see and do" section for tourists, etc. As skills develop and maintenance of the site transitions from DigiBrigade to town residents, each site could then be customized somewhat to reflect the unique feel of each community. But all would be accessible through a centralized "WelcometoVermont" Web site that would then provide a portal to each community in the state. (**Note**: This framework has already been created thanks to Joanna Cummings).
- An executive director responsible for coordinating the efforts between schools, parents and the DigiBrigade community.
- An empaneled group of school officials, preferably teachers as opposed to administrators, who would help design the work/study programs that would benefit DigiBrigade and participating students.
- An overall design of the "curriculum" that would be the basis for DigiBrigade's efforts in each community.

- A simple assessment to ensure that the program is accomplishing its mission.

Concluding Thoughts

The DigiBrigade concept has been successfully deployed in several parts of the world as a way to bring digital awareness and literacy for the first time to rural communities that are shrinking because of lack of technological infrastructure and the inevitable "brain drain" and population shrinkage that typically results. Vermont is an ideal place to deploy a similar program: It is small enough to be manageable, complex enough to pose healthy challenges, diverse enough to benefit from such a program, and demanding enough to want the very best for its children and the state's future. Not only would such a program offer untold benefits for the State of Vermont, it could also serve as a model for the rest of the country – and potentially, the world.

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